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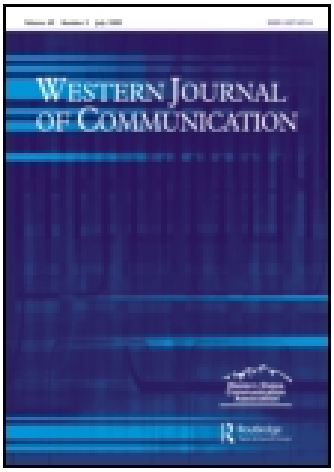

Western Journal of Communication
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwjc20

On Whose Ground? Racialized Violence and the Prerogative of "Self-Defense" in the Trayvon Martin Case

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Published online: 26 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Bryan J. McCann (2014) On Whose Ground? Racialized Violence and the Prerogative of "Self-Defense" in the Trayvon Martin Case, Western Journal of Communication, 78:4, 480-499, DOI: 10.1080/10570314.2014.901552

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2014.901552

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Western Journal of Communication
Vol. 78, No. 4, July–September 2014, pp. 480–499

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

On Whose Ground? Racialized Violence and the Prerogative of "Self-Defense" in the Trayvon Martin Case

Bryan J. McCann

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This essay argues that public discourse surrounding the Trayvon Martin case is symptomatic of an abandonment of a once vibrant rhetorical tradition of Black self-defense. This tradition imagined violence as a potential source of agency for Black Americans and other marginalized populations, and recognized the capacity of White supremacy to exercise violence on racialized bodies and communities. Instead, activists in both camps of the Martin case, as well as media outlets covering it, embraced the enthymemes of a "war on crime" discourse that codes Black violence as intrinsically at odds with the aims of civil society. By turning to mainstream and activist media coverage in the aftermath of the shooting, I describe how competing discourses on Martin's death shared an investment in false alternatives regarding race and violence. Audiences were asked to choose between Martin the angelic child victim and Martin the violent "thug," a dichotomy that stifled deliberation regarding the complex role of violence in antiracist traditions.

Keywords: George Zimmerman; Race; Self-Defense; Trayvon Martin; Violence

When neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African American, in a Florida townhome complex on February 26, 2012, national attention gravitated toward a variety of salient issues.

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ISSN 1057-0314 (print)/ISSN 1745-1027 (online) © 2014 Western States Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/10570314.2014.901552

Chief among these was the legitimacy and applicability of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" (henceforth SYG) law. The law stipulated that individuals need not retreat from situations they believed pose the risk of "death or great bodily harm." Rather, an individual may "stand his or her ground and meet force with force, including deadly force" ("Justifiable Use of Force," 2011, chap. 776.013, p. 3).

At issue were two questions. First, as Zimmerman claimed, did Martin attack him that fateful night? If so, was the 28-year-old resident justified in using deadly force? Second, is such a law justified? Gun control advocates complained that the SYG statute gave legal cover to overzealous gun owners with vigilante aspirations. Furthermore, many activists argued that Martin, who Zimmerman deemed "suspicious" as he returned to his father's home from a nearby 7-11 store wearing a hooded sweatshirt, or "hoodie," was a victim of racial profiling. They claimed his status as a young Black male made him an object of suspicion in Zimmerman's eyes, as well as in the eyes of the American public culture in general (Caputo, 2012; Robinson, 2012).

Two key narratives circulated in this deliberative space. One pitted a violent Black youth against a dutiful neighborhood watch captain defending his life. The other posited Martin as an innocent young man. Zimmerman, in this telling, enacted centuries of racial stereotypes and murdered Martin for being a "suspicious" Black male. In this essay, I am interested in the ways both narratives foreclosed others that would potentially acknowledge the legitimacy of Black anger regarding White supremacy, as well as alternative understandings of the relationship between race and violence. Public discourse surrounding the case, whether supporting or opposing the prosecution and conviction of George Zimmerman for second-degree murder, was symptomatic of a broader abandonment of a once vibrant rhetorical tradition of Black self-defense in American Civil Rights discourse. This tradition imagined violence as a potential source of agency for Black Americans and provided a heuristic resource for recognizing the capacity of White supremacy to exercise violence on racialized bodies and communities. Instead, activists in both camps of the Trayvon Martin case, as well as media outlets covering it, embraced the enthymemes of a "war on crime" discourse that codes Black violence as intrinsically vicious, illegal, and at odds with the aims of civil society. By turning to mainstream and activist media coverage in the aftermath of the shooting, I describe how competing discourses on Martin's death shared an investment in false alternatives regarding race and violence. Audiences were asked to choose between Martin the angelic child victim and Martin the violent "thug," a dichotomy that problematically stifled deliberation regarding the complex role of violence in antiracist traditions.

Since this project's inception, Zimmerman's criminal trial began and concluded with his July 13, 2013, acquittal of all charges associated with Martin's death. Public discourse surrounding the verdict and its consequences for racial politics in America continued as I wrote this essay (Landler & Shear, 2013). Still, the rhetorical parameters of the case prior to the trial provided an essential foundation for how it and subsequent public discourse unfolded, and they remain my focus here. I begin by offering a brief genealogy of race, violence, and agency in the United States. Next, I survey the key antagonisms of the Trayvon Martin case: Martin as an innocent child

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slain by a violent bigot and Zimmerman as an upstanding citizen protecting his neighborhood from a violent "thug."

I interrogated mainstream news coverage of the case, including televised content from ABC News, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, as well as print sources including the *New York Times, USA Today, Slate*, and several local Florida newspapers. In addition to drawing on traditional news outlets to ascertain the shape of national discourse on the case, I relied on texts from key advocates involved in the controversy, as well as the conservative websites Sad Hill News and The Daily Caller, which played a significant role in bolstering advocacy for George Zimmerman (Deggans, 2012). I was generally interested in how these texts advanced different arguments about the role of violence in the Martin case and the extent to which such arguments operated within or resisted hegemonic meaning systems vis-à-vis race and violence in America. Ultimately, discourses supporting and opposing the prosecution and conviction of George Zimmerman presupposed a "war on crime" logic that located legitimate violence squarely within the parameters of White civil society. I conclude with reflections on the status of race, violence, and rhetoric in social struggle.

American Discourses of Race and Violence

Public culture during the late 20th and early 21st centuries has generally categorized racialized violence as a source of sheer terror. The Black body, particularly the Black male body, has been widely construed as an object to be feared and, in moments of violent transgression, harshly disciplined (see Jackson, 2006; Muhammad, 2010). However, throughout the arc of American history, the Black prerogative of violence has also been a site of vibrant contestation between those who challenged White supremacy and those who defended it. Violent acts and their accompanying rhetorics of justification served not only to alert White power structures to the boiling anger within suppressed communities of color, but also to awaken a radical imagination therein (Scott, 1968).

To be Black in America has always entailed encounters with violence. From the horrors of abduction and the Middle Passage, to the cruelty of the plantation, as well as the White terrorism of the postemancipation South and the no-less-violent enactments of White supremacy in the North, violence was a chief building block of Black vernacular and political culture. One finds some of the richest sites of invention associated with race and violence for African Americans in folkloric and other expressive traditions. Violent "badman" tales like "Stagger Lee" and "Railroad Bill" were sources of identification for African Americans who possessed no faith in the corrupt southern criminal justice apparatus. Emancipated African Americans invented their own ways of representing and judging violence amid a White power structure that still regarded them as less than human (Roberts, 1989).

Acts of violence and rhetorical representations thereof also served a constitutive function for African American subjects. Before emancipation, violence factored significantly into Black resistance to slavery. While spirituals and escapes served a key role in combatting enslavement, violent slave revolts were a "basic assertion

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of human dignity and humanity itself'' (Genovese, 1979, p. xiii). Thus, in addition to aggravating North–South tensions and hastening civil war (Oates, 1975), revolts helped feed a growing Black radical imagination in the face of dehumanizing White supremacy. Individual accounts of violence also revealed its empowering role in resisting the horrors of chattel slavery. Consider Frederick Douglass's (1845/1968) retelling of his encounter with the slave breaker Edward Covey. After sustaining several brutal beatings at Covey's hands, Douglass retaliated. He wrote, ''It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. . . . It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom'' (pp. 82–83). For the famous abolitionist, reclaiming the prerogative of violence from Covey was a rejuvenating act of personal reinvention. More than a century later, Frantz Fanon (1963) made similar claims about the role of violence in anticolonial struggles, arguing that the purgation of the settler was a precondition for repairing the deeply damaged psyche of the colonized. Fanon's work inspired many militant activists in the United States during the late 1960s and 1970s to take seriously the place of violence in antiracist struggle (Young, 2006).

The question of violence was also a tactical one, as key figures in the 20th-century Civil Rights movement questioned the nonviolent tactics of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. The best known of these challenges came from Malcolm X (1964). His appeals to Black self-defense in speeches like ''The Ballot or the Bullet'' provided an important radical counterpoint to King's activism by making it appear more reasonable in comparison. His militancy also helped create the foundation for an antiracist vocabulary after the early successes of the Civil Rights movement left many of White supremacy's most insidious forms of violence intact (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). Even at the margins, rhetorics of Black violence helped shape the broader contours of 20th-century Civil Rights discourse.

Appeals to violence also forged lines of identification between African Americans resisting White supremacy and people of color participating in struggles elsewhere. In his provocatively titled 1962 book *Negroes with Guns*, activist Robert Williams (1962/1998) wrote, ''My cause is the same as the Asians against the imperialist . . . the the African against the white savage . . . the same as Cuba against the white supremacist imperialist'' (p. 35). Like the guerrilla insurgents of such anticolonial struggles did, Williams organized armed Black militias to confront law enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan, surmising that meeting force with at least the threat thereof was a precondition for emancipation. Because they situated the Black struggle in America within a broader tapestry of international resistance, such discussions of violence and revolution portended the central role of the Black Power movement in Civil Rights discourses in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Tyson, 1999; Young, 2006).

Black Power's emphasis on strengthening African American communities contra White America and invoking the prerogative of violent self-defense became pervasive in antiracist politics at the tumultuous close of the 1960s and dawning of the 1970s. Alongside myriad uprisings across the globe, the United States sustained a series of urban race riots. Predicated on the 1968 King assassination, as well as longstanding structural inequality, uprisings in several major cities deepened polarization in

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American racial discourse. Many Black radicals and intellectuals, and even some sectors of the federal government, characterized the riots as symbols and enactments of long-dormant anger with the false promises of racial justice in the cities of the North, just as surely as the Deep South (see Georgakas & Surkin, 2012; Kerner, 1968). Race riots became inartistic proofs for articulating the simmering rage that permeated so much of Black America.

Few political organizations deployed Black Power's rhetorics of violence more effectively than the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Founded in 1966, the Panthers organized a range of independent community services like free breakfasts to account for a lack of public resources in Black communities. They also espoused a deep distrust of law enforcement and other arteries of the state to do anything more than brutalize African Americans. In response, the Panthers publicly used militant language and attire, and openly brandished firearms. While these patrols were intended to polarize and intimidate law enforcement, Panther leaders also hoped public enactments of Black self-defense would constitute a stronger and more militant African American community (Newton, 1966/2002). One early member of the Panthers, Eldridge Cleaver (1968/1991), argued that Blacks had little choice but to take armed defense into their own hands, for, he wrote, "The racist conscience of America is such that murder does not register as murder . . . unless the victim is white" (p. 95). In a televised interview, prominent Panther Angela Davis chastised a reporter for questioning her on the role of violence in the Black Power movement when, as a child in the Jim Crow South, she bore witness to the macabre excesses of White supremacy (Rogell & Olsson, 2011). For Davis and other Panthers, the Black right to self-defense was absolutely necessary in the face of enslavement, lynchings, and institutionalized discrimination. As Robert Scott (1968) wrote in his concurrent work on Black Power and violence, "I believe that we must assume that their [violent] rhetoric makes clear the world as it is for many, perhaps most, Black Americans" (p. 103).

This move toward militant rhetorics alarmed the upper echelons of representative government and law enforcement. Groups like the Black Panthers were objects of heavy surveillance by police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who used informant infiltration and outright violence against them (Rosenfeld, 2012). By the close of the 1960s, politicians began deploying rhetorical strategies that capitalized on primarily White middle-class anxieties about urban uprisings, Black militancy, and the general political and social tumult of the period. In particular, Richard Nixon (1968) structured an ingenious political strategy around "law and order," promising in both his successful 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns to protect what he believed to be "the first civil right of every American," which was the right "to be free from domestic violence" (para. 103). Appropriating the language of "civil rights," Nixon reconstituted Black violence as exclusively criminal. Criminal justice was now a federal issue and its chief object was the unruly acts taking place in predominantly minority urban sectors that allegedly posed an existential threat to civil (read: White) society (Pager, 2007; Thompson, 2010).

In the twilight years of the 20th century, the "War on Crime" supplanted New Deal and Great Society liberalism, as political leaders increasingly articulated

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social problems through crime control (Simon, 2007). African Americans, who disproportionately relied on the social programs that emerged during the postwar era, were particularly vulnerable to this reconfiguration of political culture. The growing focus on rhetorics of fear vis-à-vis racialized violence proved key to justifying significant cuts in the social safety net in the 1980s and 1990s (Brown, 2007). Alongside this new rhetorical emphasis on law and order came increasingly harsh sentencing laws and an explosion in the nation's prison population (Alexander, 2010). Black bodies and communities became objects of sensational public fear, inscribed with what I have called the "mark of criminality" (McCann, 2012).

A shift in the rhetorical dynamics of race and violence emanating from key sectors of the African American community also occurred at the close of the 20th century. To be sure, figures like Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan continued to deploy rhetorics of violence regarding the right of African Americans to "erupt" against repression (Ford, 1990). However, Farrakhan was operating in a fundamentally different political culture than the 1960s and 1970s, when Black Power and nationalist groups so profoundly impacted the terrain of Civil Rights discourse.[1] Whereas violence was once a site of contestation amid major antiracist struggles, the coding of Black violence as an object of sheer terror was now relatively unquestioned. Black leaders increasingly turned their sights on perceived cultural malaise in urban Black communities, especially what they regarded as a crisis of gang activity, drug use, and violence. While commentary on social ills in the Black community during the mid–twentieth century generally operated within a broader critique of White supremacy, the premises of the war on crime came to overdetermine virtually all rhetorics of race and violence by the close of the 1980s (see Fineman, 1994). This shift in racial rhetorics of violence helped create the sociohistorical context in which Trayvon Martin encountered George Zimmerman one late February evening in 2012.

Rhetorics of Self-Defense in the Trayvon Martin Case

The grisly events of February 26, 2012, did not immediately attract national attention. When police arrived at the scene of the shooting, they took Zimmerman into custody, but promptly released him upon accepting his claim that he shot Martin in self-defense. According to this account, Zimmerman spotted the Black teen wandering through the Retreat at Twin Lakes at a time when the gated townhome community was experiencing a series of robberies. He promptly called the police department to inform them of this "suspicious" presence in the neighborhood. Contrary to police instructions, Zimmerman exited his car to investigate the situation further, lost track of Martin, only to be confronted by the young man minutes later. Martin allegedly asked Zimmerman "Yo, you got a problem?" to which Zimmerman replied "No." According to Zimmerman, he reached for his cell phone and Martin immediately punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground, and began slamming his head into the concrete. Zimmerman then drew his concealed handgun and shot Martin in the chest. For Zimmerman, his family, and, evidently, Sanford law enforcement, this account constituted a straightforward, if tragic, instance of

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standing one's ground (DeGregory, 2012; Thomas & Tienabesco, 2012; Trotta, 2012). However, many African American residents of Sanford, a city with an extensive history of community–police tensions, claimed the police department's failure to charge Zimmerman was racially motivated.

Meanwhile, Martin's parents' pro bono legal team devised a media strategy. With the March 7, 2012, release of a Reuters article on the incident, the saga of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman became a national story (Trotta, 2012). As scrutiny into the case mounted, Zimmerman's version of events grew more suspicious in the eyes of Martin's family, their supporters, and key figures in local and state government. For instance, immediately before his encounter with Zimmerman, Martin was speaking with a friend on his cell phone. While there was no recording of the conversation, the young woman stated in a sworn interview that Martin claimed a "crazy and creepy" man was following him. She reported hearing indications of a physical altercation before the line went dead (Kovaleski, 2012b). Furthermore, a Twin Lakes resident called 911 after hearing the confrontation outside his townhouse. One can hear a voice screaming "Help!" followed by a gunshot on the recording. While Zimmerman claimed he was the one calling for help, voice recognition experts concluded otherwise ("Trayvon Martin Case 911," 2012).[2] Furthermore, the Sanford Police Department came under significant criticism for their handling of the case, including shoddy crime scene work and an early presumption in favor of Zimmerman (Kovaleski, 2012a).

Still, it was not until April 11, 2012, following a national mobilization including petitions, rallies, and the evolution of this local tragedy into a national cause célèbre that Special Prosecutor Angela Corey charged Zimmerman with second degree murder for fatally shooting Martin ("Timeline of Events," 2012). In the time between Zimmerman's arrest and the beginning of his criminal trial, public deliberation surrounding the case fixated not only on the legitimacy of the charges against Zimmerman, but the intersection of race and violence in American public culture. Zimmerman's defenders claimed he was a dedicated member of his community acting within his rights under Florida's SYG law. Martin's family and their advocates insisted he met his untimely death due to racial profiling and an overly permissive gun law. Below, I demonstrate how both positions reinforced an ideological matrix in which Black violence is either vicious and therefore inexcusable or essentially absent.

Between "Thugs" and Innocents

The Martin family and their supporters emphasized the slain teenager's innocence, youth, and sacred familial bonds. From the moment the shooting became national news, Martin's mother Sybrina Fulton and father Tracy Martin became the central spokespersons in favor of Zimmerman's arrest and conviction for the murder of their son, as well as for major reforms in Florida's and other states' gun laws. For example, 2 months after the shooting, Fulton participated in a YouTube segment for the gun control campaign Second Chance on Shoot First ("A Message," 2012). The campaign's

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website described the sponsoring organization as "a coalition of civil rights leaders, elected officials, law enforcement professionals and other Americans committed to raising awareness about Shoot First and other unsafe gun laws" ("The Campaign," n.d.). Among these laws was Florida's SYG statute.

The video portrayed Fulton directly addressing the camera, accompanied by soft, melancholy piano chords. She wore a suit, full makeup, and wore her hair back. She was remarkable in her unexceptional appearance—she could have been any young African American's mother. Other than a brief opening shot of her wiping a single tear from her eye with a tissue, Fulton was composed as she informed her audience, "This will be my first Mother's Day without my son Trayvon." In other words, Fulton experienced something no mother deserves; she outlived her son and was forced to reckon with that on the day that exalts her once central role in his life. She continued, "Just like me, 30,000 mothers lost their children this year to senseless gun violence." At this point, the underlying political message of the video became apparent. Fulton explained, "Nobody can bring our children back, but it will bring us comfort if we can help spare other mothers the pain that we will feel on Mother's Day and everyday for the rest of our lives." She encouraged viewers to pressure their state governments to "reexamine" laws like Florida's SYG statute ("A Message," 2012). It was a deceptively simple narrative that struck to the core of normative familial discourses in the United States. Viewers were to consider Fulton's maternal misery, not reports that her slain son was himself violent.

The deceased teen's father, Tracy Martin, also related his paternal experiences in an interview with *USA Today*, explaining, "I've always let him know we as African Americans get stereotyped," adding, "I told him that society is cruel" (Alcindor, 2012, para. 3). Violence was an albatross Martin would have to bear for most of his life, but surely not a tool he would wield himself. Even Zimmerman appeared to appreciate the centrality of family in the discourse surrounding the case when, in an initial televised court hearing, he took the stand and addressed Fulton and Martin, stating, "I wanted to say I am sorry for the loss of your son." Far from insinuating that he was acting in anything other than self-defense, Zimmerman added, "I did not know how old he was. I thought he was a little bit younger than I am. And I did not know if he was armed or not" (Martin, 2012, para. 21). Zimmerman's words suggested he realized he was reckoning with the memory of Martin and Fulton's son, not the ferocious teen on whose vilification his defense relied.

While sympathy for two parents who lost their son to handgun violence carried significant cultural ethos, a far more central component of this story concerned the public's impression of Trayvon Martin. Because historical discourses of race and suspicion would likely legitimize Zimmerman's assumption that Martin was a threat that night at Retreat at Twin Lakes, his parents and their supporters projected an image of an innocent child who met a horrifying end. In addition to its frank, dignified portrayal of Sybrina Fulton, the Second Chance Campaign's YouTube video featured numerous photographs of Trayvon Martin. For instance, six seconds into the video, Fulton held an iPad displaying a picture of a smiling, younger Martin, wearing a school football uniform. At the very moment viewers learned Fulton would

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be spending Mother's Day without her son, the Second Chance Campaign allowed her to stand with him in the most All-American of attires, a football uniform, as she made her public plea for stricter gun control laws (''A Message,'' 2012).

The remainder of the video featured images of Martin and his mother standing side by side in front of a Christmas tree, Martin with a young male relative or friend, holding an infant, and posing alone at a snowboarding outing. All these images were conspicuously normal, portraying Martin as a smiling teenager doing the things teenagers do. While George Zimmerman claimed Martin posed a mortal risk that February night, these images told a dramatically different story. Trayvon Martin was not a potentially violent ''thug'' but an innocent child who fell prey to racial profiling (''A Message,'' 2012).

Images of Martin as an innocent child were common in other outlets at the height of media and social networking coverage of the case. For example, in an article critiquing the SYG law, the popular online magazine *Slate* opened their piece with a photograph of a grinning Martin juxtaposed with the headline, ''Why Trayvon Martin's Killer Remains Free.'' The image invited an interpretation of February 26th's events as the legally sanctioned murder of a handsome and innocent Black youth (Bazelon, 2012). Several news outlets posted this image alongside a 7-year-old mug shot of George Zimmerman when he was arrested on charges of assaulting a police officer—charges the state eventually dropped. This photo of a burly, unshaven man in an orange jail jumpsuit stood in stark contrast with the then 12-year-old Martin. The image was also highly racialized, as Zimmerman, the son of a White man and Latina, primarily possessed his mother's ethnic features. This visual pairing, by far the most common in the early phases of the investigation, revealed a child who met an untimely death due to a chance encounter with a ''crazy and creepy'' man (''Feds Review Killing,'' 2012; ''Growing Outrage,'' 2012; ''Trayvon Martin Case: Widespread Outrage,'' 2012).

Sympathetic artists and activists were also quick to appropriate the image of a young, innocent Martin in their efforts to secure the prosecution of George Zimmerman and generalize the case to a broader tapestry of antiracist struggle. They believed Trayvon Martin could have been any Black youth navigating the treacherous waters of a racist society. For example, artist Michael D'Antuono's (2012) widely circulated painting ''A Tale of Two Hoodies'' portrayed a young African American male, far younger than Trayvon Martin, standing before a towering police officer. The adolescent wore a hooded sweatshirt, just as Martin did the night he died, and offered the officer a bag of Skittles candy, which Martin purchased from the 7–11 that evening. The police officer, on the other hand, wore a Ku Klux Klan ''hoodie'' and pointed a pistol directly at the young African American's head. In the background, a torn American flag revealed an embedded Confederate one. On his website, D'Antuono explained that the painting ''symbolizes the travesty of racial profiling innocent children and how present day prejudices affect policy.''

Not only did the painting reinforce the imagery of an innocent Black youth slain by a racist assailant, but by incorporating images of law enforcement (George Zimmerman was a mere neighborhood watch captain), Jim Crow, and the Confederacy,

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it located Martin's death among other victims of White supremacy. In an editorial for NBC's African American online magazine the *Grio*, anti–death penalty activist David A. Love (2012) wrote,

> Nearly six decades ago, Emmett Till was murdered at a time when the lives of black boys were not highly regarded, and the rights of black Americans were under siege. Well, here we go again. The lessons people learned back then are the lessons we must once again learn today. (para. 22)

For D'Antuono (2012) and Love, Martin's death was not an isolated incident, but the most recent entry in a long history of young, Black male bodies deemed dangerous and subject to extermination. The imperative for these rhetors was to dispute this narrative with images of youthful innocence rather than alternative iterations of Black violence.

Like D'Antuono (2012), many figures sympathetic to Martin appropriated his clothing on the evening of his death, a hooded sweatshirt, or "hoodie," as a symbol of his innocence and the racist logics that drove Zimmerman to confront and shoot him. The symbolism of the hoodie grew especially rich after Fox News correspondent Geraldo Rivera claimed it was "as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman" because its association with a "gangsta" aesthetic prompted Zimmerman to perceive Martin as a "menace" (Rivera, 2012). In response, a chorus of activists reappropriated the hoodie as a symbol of youthful innocence miscast as a threat. For example, before Zimmerman's arrest, several hundred activists participated in the "Million Hoodies March" in New York City. They agitated for Zimmerman's arrest and arraignment, and critiqued the racial discourses they believe contributed to the February 26, 2012, shooting. In addition to wearing hoodies, participants chanted "Am I suspicious?" as they marched through Manhattan, arguing that the coding of the hoodie as a mark of suspicion was problematic, for it caused otherwise innocent and nonviolent youth to be perceived as threats (Sandoval & Kennedy, 2012).

In addition to the Manhattan rally, high-profile figures and ordinary citizens circulated images of themselves donning hoodies via social networks as declarations of solidarity with Martin and to suggest that the association of the piece of adolescent attire with danger was misguided ("Heat Don Hoodies," 2012; Weeks, 2012). A short viral video produced by Haitian musician Wyclef Jean portrayed several young people, ranging from small children to college-aged people of color, wearing hoodies and going about their daily lives. As the video closed, each removed the hood to reveal their full faces and said simply, "I am" (Prescribed, 2012). Whereas other antiracist activists have claimed "I am Fred Hampton" or "I am Troy Davis" to memorialize the racially charged and public deaths of specific African Americans (Fayer, Massiah, Ott, & Rockefeller, 1990; Marlowe, 2011), the participants in Jean's video stopped short of uttering Trayvon Martin's name. Rather, it lingered enthymatically, as if to further iterate the universality of his martyrdom. Any one of these young people of color could have found themselves in front of George Zimmerman's gun. Under the hood was not a threat to be profiled and extinguished, but someone

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who could be anybody's child. The movement for Trayvon Martin saw in the hoodie a signifier to be appropriated and redeployed against prevailing discourses of dangerous racialized youth.

The contextualization of violent tragedies in broader narratives of oppression holds the potential to assemble publics and galvanize them to political action (Harold & DeLuca, 2005). By emphasizing the nonviolent innocence of Trayvon Martin, the racist aggression of George Zimmerman, and the location of both within the broader structures of racialized fear and violence, advocates for Martin and his family were able to catapult the case to national notoriety. Seeking to disentangle Martin's image from historically entrenched archetypes of Black violence and criminality, his advocates fashioned a new portrait of him as a nonaggressive child whose tragic encounter with a trigger-happy bigot led to his premature demise. In wholeheartedly resisting the portrayal of Martin as violent, however, advocates nonetheless operated within the rhetorical norms of late 20th and 21st century discourses of race and violence: The young man was either nonviolent or he was a criminal. Absent from this dialogue was a consideration of what social forces might have motivated violence on Martin's part. Below, I demonstrate how the disavowal of violence rendered the campaign against Zimmerman vulnerable to the very discourses it hoped to escape.

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Troubling Images and "Thug" Histories

By relinquishing the prerogative of violence to Zimmerman and his advocates, Martin's supporters deployed a compelling narrative of a Black youth savagely murdered for the color of his skin. However, because of a range of texts circulating in mainstream, activist, and social media that refuted these simplistic portrayals of Martin and Zimmerman, rhetors supporting Zimmerman were able to deploy messages locating the events of February 26, 2012, within age-old discourses of racialized violence and criminality. They, in other words, reversed the reversal emanating from those who sought Zimmerman's conviction. Theirs was a tale of a malicious "thug" and a loyal community leader whose tragic encounter was an act of self-defense on the part of George Zimmerman.

Visual argument factored heavily into the pro-Martin constituency following the shooting. The stark contrast between an innocent, far younger Trayvon Martin and the 7-year-old mug shot of George Zimmerman supported a tragic narrative of racial profiling and overzealous gun laws. However, those sympathetic to Zimmerman's version of events sought alternative visual representations. A highly circulated parody of the Martin and Zimmerman imagery originated on the conservative blog Sad Hill News. Replacing Martin was a male African American infant with his hands folded under the chin and an unabashedly adorable smile on his face. In Zimmerman's place was the iconic beast from the Predator movie franchise, complete with viscous fangs, a clenched fist, and eyes revealing an intrinsic desire to destroy innocent life. The implication was that mainstream and activist media had cast their lot with a simplistic narrative of youthful innocence lost at the hands of a hyper-violent beast ("Mainstream Media," 2012).

In addition to critiquing what they regarded as prevalent and biased visual rhetorics, Zimmerman's supporters circulated images and narratives about Martin that troubled the story of innocence slain by racism. Several websites aggressively portrayed Martin as the stuff of racialized nightmares that have helped justify institutional and extralegal violence against Black bodies throughout American history. For example, one popular image distributed through social media contained the text, "Media bias: Because nothing says fair like putting a mugshot looking photo in 'county orange' next to a 5 year old picture of the victim as a child. But hey, two can play at that game" ("Why #TeamDueProcess," 2012). For the authors of this meme, the mainstream portrayal of Martin as an innocent child was both unfair to Zimmerman and out of step with reality. Two images accompanied the text. A more recent photograph of Zimmerman showed a leaner young man, wearing a full suit and a smile, rather than a jail uniform and a scowl. It was a quintessential image of an upstanding citizen. The second picture, allegedly of a teenage Trayvon Martin (a claim that was later debunked), portrayed a topless young Black man wearing a winter cap, sagging red pants, and extending two middle fingers to the camera in what the cultural discourses of gangsta rap would characterize as a "thug" pose (see Quinn, 2005). The meme reversed the narrative of an innocent Martin and villainous Zimmerman into a retelling of Zimmerman's story ("The Trayvon Martin," 2012).

Martin's online presence before his death was also a source of texts that portrayed him as a violent teen up to no good. A number of Zimmerman advocates, including the popular conservative opinion site The Daily Caller, accessed Facebook and Twitter accounts that allegedly belonged to Martin. One of the fruits of this mining was an image of Martin, shortly before his death, donning a pair of grills, or gold jewelry that covers the teeth. The grill is generally associated with hip-hop culture and signifies, for many, racialized criminal threats ("Texas School," 2006). Furthermore, Trayvon Martin's Twitter handle, or account name, was No_Limit_Nigga, itself an adaptation of a gangsta ethos by a 17-year-old African American ("The Last Tweets," 2012). The Daily Caller site posted 152 pages of Tweets from Martin's account, many of which reinforced the Martin-as-thug narrative:

> "RT @x_highlyfavored-fuck a bitch, any bitch, who you want? take yo pick, but you gone have to take yo time.
> "RT @fukunurhoexxx: #youthetype of bitch that give up your pussy for free and think its cool #pussyaintfree #fb
> "2 glock 40's . . . bitch u got 80 problems
> "RT @ xoxoMaxDee: Fuck these haters I'll kill 'em all if I could!" (Martosko, 2012a)

Another Twitter account allegedly belonging to Martin included a picture of him extending a middle finger to the camera and a December, 2011 Tweet that read, "Plzz shoot tha #mf dat lied 2 u!." The Daily Caller conceded, "It's unclear who Martin intended the message for, or whether he intended it to be taken literally" (Martosko, 2012b, para. 2). Nonetheless, journalist David Martosko opened his article with this Tweet.

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While the "RT" notation indicates Martin was simply "Retweeting" friends' words, this material showed the 17-year-old Martin participating in Black vernacular practices that, since at least the 1980s, are associated with racialized violence. These public performances of street authenticity, long a mainstay of hip-hop traditions, represented for many Zimmerman advocates prima facie evidence that Martin, and young men of color like him, were threats to the social order. Specifically, the circulation of these discourses across social media validated Ronald Jackson's (2006) concern that contemporary representations of Black masculinity as intrinsically angry, violent, and hypersexual "are being socially reconstituted and redefined on a daily basis" (p. 5). Thus, while the mythos of the vicious Black male has always been a centerpiece of American White supremacy (see Orbe, 1998), its contemporary ubiquity is unprecedented. Whereas such performances are often modes of survival amid the structures of White supremacy (Majors & Billson, 1992), those sympathetic to Zimmerman regarded them as obvious threats.[3] Of course George Zimmerman acted in self-defense.

Aside from projecting a "thug" image in their own right, such images and information regarding Martin's online activity accompanied other texts calling his "innocence" into question. For example, the British *Daily Mail* featured the photograph of Martin donning grills in an article that detailed several disciplinary problems he encountered at school shortly before his death ("Trayvon Martin Case: He Was Suspended," 2012). Drawing from an earlier piece in the *Miami Herald* (Robles, 2012), the *Mail* explained that Martin was suspended from school three times for graffiti, possessing allegedly stolen jewelry, and carrying a plastic bag with traces of marijuana—all deeds with an overdetermined relationship to Black youth in mainstream discourses of race and criminality (see Brown et al., 2003). The staff reporter wrote, "The new claims, revealed in a leaked report, paint a different picture of a teenager who frequently found himself in trouble with authorities" ("Trayvon Martin Case: He Was Suspended," 2012, para. 2).[4]

The convergence of Martin's "thug" image with behaviors that fit neatly in longstanding cultural narratives of young people of color threatening civil society sought to reconfigure the parameters of innocence and violence in ways that favored Zimmerman. Importantly, the fundamental premises of who might justifiably act violently in civil society remained undisturbed, as the choice between an innocent Martin attacked by a racist Zimmerman, or a righteous Zimmerman defending himself against a hostile Martin were largely the only options available to interlocutors in this controversy. Such imagery functioned not only to defend or contest Martin's innocence, but accepted the premise that the vernacular practices of Black youth are objects of danger. The only salvation for Martin's memory was one devoid of aggression and embedded in the syntax of normative (i.e., White) youth behavior.

Wounded Bodies and the Possibilities of Violence

On April 20, 2012, the day of Zimmerman's first court appearance during a bond hearing, ABC News released a photograph from the evening of Trayvon Martin's

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death. It was a close-up shot of the bloodied back of Zimmerman's head taken with a cell phone camera. The image appeared to support Zimmerman's claim that Martin repeatedly bashed his head against the concrete sidewalk that night (Gutman, Tienabesco, & Forer, 2012). For Zimmerman's supporters, the grainy photograph proved he was exercising his legally protected right to defend himself against a violent "thug" who, in the words of the neighborhood watch captain's defense attorney, "armed himself with the concrete sidewalk and used it to smash George Zimmerman's head" (Winch, 2013, para 31). This graphic image, in other words, settled the story.

However, while media outlets trumpeted the photograph as a "key piece of evidence," commentators also cautioned that it was not a magic bullet (Sawyer & Gutman, 2012, para. 1). ABC legal analyst Dan Abrams noted that "the fundamental legal question remains, who was the aggressor?" (Stephanopoulos, Roberts, & Gutman, 2012, para. 8). If Martin was acting in self-defense, Zimmerman could not claim to be doing the same. Thus, the meaning of this photograph was contingent upon its circulation amid other discourses in the Martin/Zimmerman controversy (see Finnegan & Kang, 2004). If one was inclined to accept the narrative of the innocent child slain by the predatory bigot, then the image of Zimmerman's bloodied head was simply a testament to Martin's legitimate desire to "stand his ground" (O'Brien, Romans, Toobin, & Cain, 2012). If one embraced the archetype of the young Black male imposing violence on a quiet Florida suburb, then Zimmerman's corporeal pain revealed the extent of Martin's ferocity and the desperation of Zimmerman's situation. As the eventual not-guilty verdict and public statements from one juror suggest, the second, culturally entrenched narrative prevailed (Ford, 2013).

But what if we refused the neat distinction between the angelic teen and ravenous "thug," or the dutiful watchman and trigger-happy bigot? How would the meaning of Zimmerman's bloody head lacerations and broken nose change if we situated them in a broader discourse of self-defense that recalls earlier generations' understandings of racialized violence in the context of White supremacy? Anticipating Slavoj Žižek's (2008) distinction between objective and subjective violence, activists and scholars ranging from Frederick Douglass (1845/1968) to Angela Davis (Rogell & Olsson, 2011) have imagined Black aggression as a response to something grander than discrete threats of violence (subjective), but to entire structures of subjugation (objective). Furthermore, numerous race scholars have noted the central role of rage in the political constitution of Black publics, arguing that theorizing and thoughtfully deploying "Black rage" (Grier & Cobbs, 1992) is a precondition for meaningful antiracist practice (see hooks, 1995). If we were to accept George Zimmerman's claim that Trayvon Martin threw the first punch that night, situating the ensuing events in a broader history of violence could enable us to still consider Martin's an act of self-defense. For, if Zimmerman had identified the tall Black teenager in a hoodie to be a potential threat to himself and his neighbors, and if Martin were aware that a strange man was profiling him (something neither side in this controversy contested), then an assault on Zimmerman could be read as a visceral defense against the racialized violence of suspicion and surveillance about which Martin's father warned him several years before.

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This hypothetical meditation is, of course, written from the privilege of academic distance. If there is a central flaw in these conclusions and the preceding analysis, it is a tenuous connection to pragmatic political practice. Drawing on longstanding racial wounds to justify violence against George Zimmerman would likely have been disastrous for Martin's supporters. Not only would Zimmerman still be a free man today, but public sympathy would likely be more emphatically in his favor. The rhetorics that wed Black youth and malicious violence overdetermined the Trayvon Martin case, just as they do in other realms of popular and political culture at the nexus of race and violence. Thus it was quite understandable, indeed necessary, to rebuke those discourses on their own terms by directly challenging the portrayal of Martin as a "thug" and Zimmerman as a dutiful protector of his community.

Rather than prescribing an abrupt shift in contemporary discourse on the death of Trayvon Martin, I have instead gestured toward a critical interrogation on our discourses on race and violence, and the ways they enable and constrain deliberation regarding the prerogative of violence in civil society. Only recently have rhetorical scholars begun to take seriously the role of violence in public discourse as something other than communication's opposite (see Engels, 2013; Rand, 2009). By interrogating the competing discourses of violence and self-defense in the Trayvon Martin case, I have hopefully shed light on one of many alternative paths for rhetorical scholars considering the role of violence in public culture. The question of who may rightfully lay claim to violence and under what circumstances, and precisely how we distinguish the violence of individuals from those woven into the fabric of everyday life are desperately urgent and ripe for interrogation by rhetorical and social critics of race and racism.

Lastly, the tragedy that unfolded at the Retreat at Twin Lakes in late February 2012 should invite a less puritanical politics of victimhood. The trope of the victim is both pervasive and appealing in discourses of violence and criminal justice. Publics typically desire angelic victims and monstrous villains (McCann, 2007). The rhetorics of violence I have detailed here are symptomatic of such a disposition. However, these stark distinctions distract us from the profoundly untidy nature of criminal justice in America (see Hartnett, 2008). There is great conceptual space between thugs and angels, or monstrous bigots and community protectors. The individuals engaged in tragedies like the death of Trayvon Martin are complex subjects whose lived experiences resist the capture of smiling portraits, intimidating photographs, Black vernacular practices, or wounded bodies. To be clear, I do not believe the aporia at the intersection of race and violence diminishes the need for coherent political practice in the pursuit of a more just society. To the contrary, engaging the difficult contours of this and other cases affords more rhetorical avenues for activists to bypass the pitfalls of hegemonic racial reasoning.

Viewing Trayvon Martin as a victim does not require an investment in simplistic caricatures that affirm the very logics that cast him as a threat in the first place. For example, several months after the shooting, political rappers Dead Prez, Mike Flo, and Mos Def (2012) released a single and accompanying video entitled "Made You Die." Adopting a perspective on violence similar to that of the 20th-century

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Black Power movement, they proclaimed, ''I'm tired of the marchin', rallyin', the protestin'/We hoopin' and hollerin', still we gettin' no jusice.'' Invoking the names of earlier Black victims of profiling and violence, the rappers adopt an ethic of self-reliance and, more provocatively, self-defense. They rap, ''When I die don't put me on a shirt, my nigga/Be a revolutionary, make 'em hurt my nigga.'' Of course, such militant rhetorics will not play well in the domain of mainstream political and popular discourse. However, another generation's promoters of self-reliance and self-defense were also marginal relative to their more palatable counterparts in the struggle for racial justice. They were nonetheless able to leave salient imprints on the movement by testing the limits of public discourse (Condit & Lucaites, 1993). Today, rhetorical appeals to a ''postracial'' or ''color-blind'' society obscure the violence of White supremacy in virtually all facets of culture and governance (see Brown et al., 2003; Enck-Wanzer, 2011). If past is prologue in such matters, contemporary activists should seek new ways to reckon with the macabre complexities before them and expand the parameters of who may stand one's ground.

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Notes

[1] Farrakhan was also an object of intense public criticism for his disparaging remarks about Jews, women, and members of the LGBTQ community. Such infamy undercut much of his ability to function as a prominent Black leader (see Magida, 1996).

[2] During Zimmerman's criminal trial, the origin of the distressed voice was a key source of contention between the defense and prosecution (Roig-Franzia, 2013).

[3] Of course, the tethering of violence and masculinity is not exclusive to representations of the African American community (Ericsson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999).

[4] A postmortem toxicology report revealed Martin had small amounts of marijuana in his system at the time of his death. Zimmerman's defense attorneys cited this during the trial as evidence that the teenager posed a threat to their client (Sloane & Winch, 2013).

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